A difference which makes a difference

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A difference which makes a difference: Studying exemplary practitioners in disadvantaged neighborhoods

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abstract

In order to understand how exemplary work is done in a changing, complex urban environment and disadvantaged neighborhoods in particular, we selected and studied a group of approximately 50 empathic entrepreneurs: civil servants, professionals and active citizens who make a difference. We use a set of methods and techniques that resembles ethnographic fieldwork in local governance and policy making more general, but gives it a twist. In this paper we sketch our theoretical ideas and research strategy and we give some examples of what we have encountered in the field.

1. Complexity, urban change and neighborhoods

Practitioners involved in public policy making are confronted with uncertainty, differences and interdependence (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). It is hard to predict the future, let alone to steer it through public policies. In Public Administration, an increasingly popular way of talking about this state is in terms of complexity (e.g., Wagenaar, 2007; Teisman et al., 2009). Complexity theorists tell us that governance processes in which policy makers work are "erratic and non-linear; stability and predictability are an exception in these processes" (Boons et al., 2009: 232). Examples of processes in which this complexity can be seen are projects in large infrastructure projects and urban renewal.

Complexity theory gives an analysis of the unstable, constantly changing state of affairs. It is not the case that the dynamic nature of processes is of a recent date. Some forty years ago, for instance, Donald Schön (1971) already wrote that we have moved 'beyond the stable state'. So, although it may be that the degree of complexity has increased - partly because policy makers have to deal with the unintended consequences of their previous attempts to solve problems – the formation of ideas on the state of affairs has been going on for half a century. What seems to have changed, however, is *the extent* to which actors are confronted with uncertainty, differences and interdependence. This counts as much for infrastructure problems and problems in big cities, as it counts for other areas of policy making.

In this paper we are concerned with the complexities that are encountered by those who work in urban environments, 'deprived'/'disadvantaged'/'problematic' neighborhoods in particular. An example of increased complexities most visible to professionals and others working at the neighborhood level is the appearance of a large group of people with multiple needs (Kruiter et al. 2008; Hartman and Tops 2005: 43). The system of care, subdivided as it is, is hardly able to deal with these cases. Apparently, this is amongst others because the information on these cases is scattered across care providers.

Complexity theory and its predecessors in Public Administration have been inspired by early developments in systems theory and ecological perspectives on organizations that focus on the macro and meso levels of analysis. As a result, these theories are in principle well able to highlight exogenous factors shaping governance processes. So what about the possibilities for getting a grip on such complexities in concrete cases? Boons et al. (2009) argued that management of complexity is possible when they state that public managers "have to understand and try to manage their own system to reduce its vulnerability, but also have to be sensitive to their environment and have to influence the interrelation between their own system and its environment to safeguard the added value of their own system" (Ibid.: 247). At the same time these authors state that the grip of individual managers or even organizations is limited, when they say that all authorities can do is "adjust themselves to the many and multiple process dynamics" (Ibid.: 232).

Various researchers who have shown a keen awareness of the increasing societal and administrative complexity, have chosen to focus on the daily struggles at the micro level (e.g., Schön, 1983; Healey 1992; Forester, 1999). This second group of

researchers has chosen to get familiar with the work of practitioners in planning, public management and other fields. The idea is not that what happens in practice is geared by agency only, but that what individual actors can and do make a difference; that there are practitioners who are exemplary in what they do.[1] That does not mean that practitioners do not need others. On the contrary, the way they work together with others will probably be one of the most central elements of their success.

Like this second group of researchers, we are interested in practitioners' ways of working (the practice)[2] and ways of relating to the world. We decided to study the work of individual practitioners who might be active citizens doing voluntary work in their neighborhoods, public managers and policy makers in the local bureaucracy and housing corporations or front line workers like police officers and social/youth/community workers. We are looking for people who seem to be successful in pursuing the social goals they set together with their compatriots. What we ask ourselves is how practitioners in these areas go about if they have to engage in controversial, politically sensitive policy processes that might develop in unintended and surprising ways. This brings us to the following question:

Through what ways of working and relating do exemplary urban practitioners (try to) get things done?

The research we do is broad in scope. What it aims to do is to explore the ways in which a variety of practitioners might make a difference. We have not limited our research to, for instance, a certain role or a type of neighborhood governance (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Our main limitation is that we are looking for *exemplary practitioners* (Van Hulst et al. 2009), practitioners who stand out because of what they achieve.

Section 2 formulates a theoretical answer to the question posed above. Here we elaborate on the kind of actors we are looking for if we are interested in exemplary practice in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Section 3 & 4 inform the reader about the empirical research that we have designed and some preliminary empirical findings that this research has produced. In section 5 we leave the reader with some of our concluding thoughts.

2. The empathic entrepreneur

In (Dutch) urban areas under pressure like disadvantaged neighborhoods, it is not always the standard procedure that gets things done. The decades of urban renewal in its various forms have not solved problems permanently. This does not mean that success is never attained. What seems to have helped in some cases is the presence of a type of practitioner who goes beyond standard procedure. These are people who do not to give up and who are able to succeed where others have failed. Most likely these are experienced practitioners who learned how to cope. Most likely these are actors who inspire others. In the Public Administration literature and the literature of related disciplines we find examples of such exemplary practitioners (Van Hulst et al. 2009).

In the work of Donald Schön (1983), for example, we encounter the reflective practitioner, who deals with problems through 'conversations with the situation at

hand.' According to Schön, excellent practitioners spend much time on setting their problems. They engage in framing and re-framing problems in order to make them more solvable. They also experiment on the spot, listening well to the way the situation 'talks back' at them. John Forester (1999) adds a socio-political dimension to Schön's creative practitioner. He shows how in planning, exemplary are those practitioners who are able to sensitize people for each other's values and interests. In order to get things done in urban environments under pressure, it makes no sense to rush things, he tells us. On the contrary, it is important that practitioners make time for listening and for (re)building relations. A third example are the everyday fixers Frank Hendriks and Pieter Tops (2005; see also Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009)[3] talked about. These successful practitioners have a personal drive that helps them to get things done. They combine this with the ability 'to communicate, to persuade, to imagine oneself in someone else's world and to bring together different worlds' (Hendriks and Tops 2005: 487). Talking about Dutch front line workers, Pieter Tops and Casper Hartman (2009; see also Durose 2009 for a British case) argued that those who do their work successfully have particular characteristics and skills needed in the front line. They are able to 'read situations', knowing about actors in it and what has happened to them, and seeing the opportunities that a situation offer. They are also engaged in what they do, doing their job with heart and soul. And finally, they are able to allow appropriate ways of acting to emerge on the spot, a quality that might also referred to as improvisation skills and bricolage, closely related to what Schön (1983) called reflection-in-action.[4]

If we add what we know about (working in) disadvantaged neighborhoods to what researchers like Schön, Forester, Hendriks, Hartman and Tops tell us, we come to the conclusion that in order to make progress in urban areas under pressure, it might be crucial that practitioners have a keen understanding of what is needed, even if they have to find out the precise problems and solutions every time they come into contact with new people, issues and situations. They have the entrepreneurial ways of working that involve looking for new opportunities and making connections a variety of people within and beyond the boundaries of the area in which they work. But they are not entrepreneurs in managerial sense however (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Being effective is just a part of what they are after. These practitioners are more likely driven by a wish to move society in a certain direction than by their professional standards or institutional rules of some sort. Their interest is not in keeping the system intact. Most probably they are also more engaged with the lifeworld of citizens in need than most other practitioners. Their way of relating to the world is characterized by empathy. Important in this is local knowledge. That is 'the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience' (Yanow 2004: S12). The contact these practitioners have with people in and around the areas in which they work give them access to local knowledge and helps them to develop their own local knowledge.

Access to local knowledge and one's own local knowledge, builds up over time. This kind of knowledge, even though it might be in part only tacitly known, is needed to have a clear sense of what is experienced as problematic by the communities practitioners work with. And as Durose states of the front line workers she studied: they are not just coping, trying to deal with cases that do not fit the rules; 'they now

use their contextual understanding to actively engage with "hard to reach" groups in the community' (Durose 2009: 47). They might themselves originate in the area or have strong social or cultural ties to the people who live in the area.

All together, taken the need for goal-seeking entrepreneurialism and emphatic engagement, perhaps a good way to characterize the practitioners we are looking for as *empathic entrepreneurs*.[5] Various kinds of entrepreneurs have been talked about before. The ones we are aware of are the *political* entrepreneur (Walker 1974), the *policy* entrepreneur (Kingdon 1984/1995), the *social* entrepreneur (Leadbeater 1997), *civic* entrepreneur (Leadbeater and Goss 1998) and the *institutional* entrepreneur (Lowndes 2005). In research on neighborhoods variations of the concept have gained in popularity over the last years (Hendriks and Tops 2005; Durose 2009; Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks 2009; Giltay Veth 2009).[6] The entrepreneur most people seem to be talking about is one who is willing 'to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return' (Kingdon 1984/1995: 122).

It is certainly not our aim to just invent our own variation of the concept, regardless of the concepts, ideas and empirical support that others have advanced. Nevertheless, our concept of the empathic entrepreneur differs from the alternative mentioned above in the sense that it puts forward not a domain type (political, policy, civic, social, institutional) and a general way of working (entrepreneurial), but a combination of a general way of working and quality/type of involvement. The domains in which we look for our practitioner do overlap with the previous mentioned.[7]

It goes without saying that such practitioners are not alone in the world. Their agency would not have much value if it did not work in certain contexts within the wider urban environment. To understand them it is therefore necessary to keep in mind the contexts in which they work. In the urban environment separate contexts can be found. The local bureaucracy forms a specific context, as do other public organizations and the neighborhoods with their communities themselves. But even if many professional and volunteers spend a large part of their day in the same space, meeting the same people, these contexts are connected in many ways. They are connected by people who have dealings in various contexts. They are connected because they share the same or a similar urban environment. And they are also connected because many policy projects, initiatives and individual residents compete for the same, limited amount of money and attention. And the economic crisis triggers even more competition since the budgets are shrinking.

Somehow our emphatic entrepreneurs have survived up until now. At least, some of them. The best or the luckiest ones? That is hard to tell. Somehow our empathic entrepreneurs are able to do something new without getting stuck in procedures or nets of rules. They might even make 'local government more open and sensitive to all clients than had traditionally been the case' (Healey 1992: 19). Empathic entrepreneurs probably make a difference because they bring something to neighborhoods that is badly needed. They have and do something different that makes a difference. Is it their mere empathy, engagement and energy? For sure, but without experience they would perhaps not make it. Understanding empathic entrepreneurs also means understand

what they are not. What should then be clear is that empathic entrepreneurs are successful in their work as it manifests itself outside the bureaucratic institutions, while there are others who are clearly successful in bureaucratic institutions themselves. Empathic entrepreneurs can be exemplary practitioners because they make a fit with the environment in which they 'do their thing'. Although not giving up too quickly is important condition for them to succeed and practitioners often have to fight many battles to get things done, it is not just a matter of survival of the *fittest*, but also one of survival of the *fitting*.[8]

In some contexts, like the local bureaucracy with its rules, hierarchy and meetings other actors, like the (ideal type) bureaucrat or the politician, might be called exemplary for getting certain things done in regular policy making, i.e., not in disadvantaged neighborhoods. At the same time we do not beforehand exclude those who work in a bureaucratic context from our list of possible empathic entrepreneurs. The category is rather meant to indicate a certain way of working (entrepreneurial) and relating to the world of disadvantaged neighborhoods and their residents (empathy) that might be harder to sustain in a bureaucratic context, but might also offer opportunities because of its uniqueness in the context. There is, however, a rather big chance that our empathic entrepreneurs position themselves in the boundaries between various contexts, which places them in a 'double periphery' (Yanow 2004). These people do not just belong in one context or another. This enables them to translate knowledge (meanings, sentiments) in both directions and to understand the needs on both sides of the boundary. It enables them to match the institutional logic of the local bureaucracy to the situational logic of concrete problems in neighborhoods and vice versa (Hendriks and Tops 2005). Or, as Healey (1992: 17) said of skilled planners, they are able to 'operate across knowledge forms in their daily work'.

3. Research strategy

Now we have, in the abstract, described who we are looking for, it is time to talk about the way we are looking. There is no obvious strategy to find and study exemplary practitioners in general, and empathic entrepreneurs in specific. As researches, we have been moving back and forth between observations that triggered the project, literature, hunches and empirical observations. This iterative, circular research practice has been supported by the organization around the investigation. Our investigation is embedded in a research consortium with two universities (Tilburg University, TU Delft), NICIS Institute and five Dutch local governments: Amsterdam, The Hague, Leeuwarden, Utrecht and Zwolle. The various moments of interaction were used to shape and reshape the project. Overall, we can say that we have used a set of methods and techniques that resembles ethnographic fieldwork in local governance (Van Hulst 2008) and policy making more general, but gave it a twist. In particular, there were two separate, distinctive rounds of research that we used: *scouting* and *profiling*.

Scouting

Our research design concerning case selection and methods had to be appropriate for studying actors who do not go around wearing a name tag 'exemplary practitioner'. That is why we used a new research approach for finding our subjects. Although this

way of working involves common elements of regular qualitative research, like snowballing, it is different *as an approach*. We called it *scouting*. We hired a social (and we might say, empathic) entrepreneur whom we asked to look for, *to approach* (!), exemplary practitioners working in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the five cities that participate in the investigation.[9] His job was to contact a large number of people. Within this large group he had to find a group of approximately 50 practitioners that would fit the idea of the people who make a difference, people who stand out, people who engaged local communities - in short, empathic entrepreneurs.[10]

The idea was that he would go out into the neighborhood to talk to people. And that he did. Our social entrepreneur, Dick de Ruijter, talked to 225 people, gathered around 1000 names of people who might be interesting and finally made the list of 50, divided unevenly over the five cities: Amsterdam (12 actors), The Hague (12 actors), Leeuwarden (7 actors), Utrecht (12 actors), Zwolle (7 actors).[11] The actors selected are successful, in the sense of having played an important part in the development of an organization or of certain project(s) in the public sector. This is of course a inter-subjective judgment of both the importance of an organization or project and the role of a person in it.

At our request De Ruijter kept a dairy in which he wrote about his experiences, his encounters, his interpretation of urban change and most of all, about the people he met. In the diary we read that he was direct in his approach, meaning that he would meet with people as soon as they would be available, and that he went to meet them in their (working) context or in their homes. In the conversations he had, he tried - as would an ethnographer - to look at the city through the eyes of the person he met. He also hung around in the neighborhoods. In contrast to the observer who tries to be neutral, De Ruijter wrote in his dairy, he was rather 'present' in the conversations he had. He did not try to be a fly on the wall, but used his social and intellectual skills to test the flexibility of his conversation partner. This way he was able to move beyond formalities and socially desirable behavior quickly. He also found out what his conversation partners were after, what they wanted their work to accomplish. Throughout the period in which De Ruijter visited the cities, at several occasions we joined him to experience his scouting work. In four out of five cities we met with the selected practitioners for the first time in the presence of our scout. This way the relationship he had build with them was, to some extent, transferred to us.

Profiling

For our second round of research we drew inspiration from John Forester's work on practice stories and profiles of practitioners (see, the website he and others developed http://courses2.cit.cornell.edu/fit117/ and Forester 2006). We wanted to make short profiles of our 50 practitioners. In order to make such profiles we observed them during a working day. As people tend to move around quite a bit, and the people we observed are certainly no exception, observing a person *de facto* means following or shadowing. This has been done for quite some time. Mintzberg's structured observation (1970) is probably the best known example of it. It is however not used very often (Noordegraaf 2007; McDonald 2005; Czarniawska 2007).

Following as we did meant participating in the life of that person, albeit for just one day. It involved writing up what was said and done, and later on (in the train

home, at the desk) trying to understand what was done by what was said and what was said by what was done. Throughout our observation days there was often time to connect with the practitioner on a more personal level and briefly discuss things on the agenda or things that had happened during the day. Following practitioners around for one day, also meant getting to know a part of the context in which a person acts and other actors who are part of that context. It also helped us notice unforeseen opportunities, e.g., we discovered that it was interesting to have brief conversations with people who knew the practitioner well in which we could ask them to describe the person we were following in 20 seconds. On various days this offered interesting insights.

The observations did not stand alone however. At the end of each observation day we interviewed the practitioners. Interviews lasted between 1 hour and 3 hours. We kept in mind Forester's advise (2006) on interviewing practitioners about their work. The interviews focused on a project we asked the practitioners to select. These would have to be projects in which they had invested a substantial part of their time and which illustrated the way they work. We asked what they did to make the project a success, what problems they ran into along the way and how they dealt with them. We asked people to be as concrete as possible (see also, Weiss 1994) and to tell us about what they did, not so much what they thought about it. At the start of the interview we asked the practitioner to tell us briefly about their background. At the end of the interview we asked people to tell us what motivates them in their work. If they had sent us documents about their work (we asked for them, but they were not always sent), these might have led to additional questions as would what had happened during the day.

A whole observation day, including the interview, would take on average at least 11 hours and normally added up to at least 50 pages of fieldnotes. The key to this day in the field was that its elements would form one research unity. Throughout the day an image of the person would begin to form, a relation would be build and the interview at the end would, partly as a result of the previous interaction, enable to bring out a rich narrative. The activities and the skills needed for this kind of research strategy are very similar to the ones needed for doing ethnography (Van Hulst 2008: 149). During the second research round we also experimented with our analysis. In the meanwhile we analyzed a set of practitioners, trying to typify their particular *ways of working* and *ways of relating*, as we decided to call them. In the next section we will give a taste of the empirical findings so far (we have not finished the fieldwork and analysis at this point).

4. What makes empathic entrepreneurs exemplary

The people we followed were not most similar cases, so to speak. On the contrary, the group of 50 not just worked in different environments (i.e., different cities and areas in the city) and in different contexts (e.g., in the local bureaucracy or another public organization), they were also different kinds of people in other respects, like the background (Dutch native or something else) and age (although there were only a few young people among them).[12] The ways of working and ways of relating of the people we followed were not the same either. There was a big overlap there, nevertheless.

And, to be sure, most of the people fit the idea of an empathic entrepreneur very well. In the following we present various interesting characteristics of their ways of working and ways of relating to the world.

Connecting and transforming people, projects and contexts

Our empathic entrepreneurs make connections. There is nothing new about that. In a society which is supposedly a group of networks, connecting supposedly is a basic task. That is why, whenever we talk about making connections, we should be specific about the types of connections that are made. What our practitioners connect are people, projects and contexts. The position of various of our empathic entrepreneurs was somewhere in the periphery of the local bureaucracy or in the boundary between contexts. As a civil servant told us, one day he talks to people in trailer parks who cannot read or write and the next he talks to the alderman. Connecting people, projects and contexts involves making use of local knowledges and 'translating' (Yanow 2004) back and forth. Or, as one of our practitioners called it, speaking different languages. But, our empathic entrepreneurs do not just translate institutional knowledge into lay(wo)men's knowledge and back, or from one (sub)culture to another and vice versa. If possible, they also try to make the two sides involved fit better and in the process help to transform both.

A good example is a social worker we met. He had been working with young people who were doing underground art for almost a decade. He was able to let the young people he worked with turn their underground art into a public, respectable one. Throughout the years he also helped the young people to form a community. Of major importance here were (sub)cultural knowledge and personal knowledge of people he works with. The social worker told us an anecdote about the manner in which he connected the underground artists to one another:

> 'I wanted to involve them more. The first time around there were seven or eight writers [the way these artists call themselves]. It was very special to notice that they used their writers names to address one another. They also said: if you have a writers name, in fact you have an anonymous name and I cannot betray you because I do not know your name. Then we got to a situation in which I said to D: "Why don't you do this [project] with K?" And he responded: "K? Who is that?" Then I said: "He is sitting right next to you." They had to get used to it, using each other's real name. But through all of these small steps, there was more and more involvement in the project.'

The entrepreneurial use of networks and knowledge can be central to one's work. Some have developed not just the repertoire, but also the vocabulary to talk about this way of working. One of the civil servant we met talked about brokering and shifting gears:

> 'When I talk of brokering I think of bringing people together and when I talk of shifting gears I mean trying things out, … to find out if you can use a higher gear, if you can intensify things a little. For example with the Music, in relation to the Concert Hall [this referred to a certain project he was working on]. Then,

> all of a sudden, I see possibilities and I put in additional effort. I also try to steer a bit more. If I see possibilities I become a bit more directive. […] Of course I information because of working in the local bureaucracy that people on the outside do not have. For example about the fusion [of various neighborhoods]. This kind of information you use.'

What we see here is that a civil servant is able to get things done because of his special position. He knows the people and the projects in the neighbourhood and is able to see their overlap and the complementarities. The same person was typified by one of his contacts as 'always helping, knowing everything, knowing everybody.' According to this contact this civil servant was engaged to an extent that is rather rare. Like many others we met, this civil servant would contact his network partners frequently, most of the time preferring face-to-face contact to other forms of connection.

A migrant woman running a voluntary organization for women also gave us an excellent example of the way in which one might connect people with the same or similar problems. Many women in the neighborhood come to the organization and talk to her about their problems. As a result, she knew about many things the women do not know about each other. On some days she invites women with a certain problem to come to meet her. Once all women are gathered, she 'locks the door' and tells the women, 'now we are going to talk about the problem you all share'.

Here we see that our practitioners know about the people they work with and the contexts they work in. They also know that they have to create an atmosphere in which people can trust each other. They have to create an atmosphere in which they can do their entrepreneurial work. One of the younger practitioners explained us the following:

> 'We also invested enormously in the Turkish bar and in the mosque, when we were in that neighborhood. I thought: "We have to first make ourselves popular over there!" We did this by dropping by and offering some things: free juridical advise, everybody could hand in his tax forms, apply for medical allowance… you can apply for anything and fill it in together. Hundreds of Euros they earned that first week because we did this for them. You have to get what you see as added value. At the mosque, they thought it was added value. And at the Turkish bar we always have a drink, lunch and they come to bring Turkish tea. You just make sure that they do not ignore us, but come to talk and say hi. I also said, if you ever need something or we are giving you trouble, please let me know. I also give them trust by giving them my mobile number when we are on holidays, so they can call me if there is vandalism or burglary. The changes that this happens from the bar are very slim as they have many functions in the neighborhood. This way you can keep them close.'

Ways of connecting become quite concrete in specific social strategies that our practitioners use. We observed for instance that throughout the day they might talk about the same case to various people. But every time the story that they would tell about the case would be told in a way that fits the audience. As we knew, stories that are told in practice do certain work (Forester 1999). Our practitioners proved to be

aware of the work stories could do in making connections among people, projects and contexts. Another example is the use of humor, as presented in an interview:

> 'Humor, if it suits the situation, it is my strength. It opens doors and it is fun. I think you only should do this work if you have fun in it. If you miss the fun, you should leave and find something else.' [...] 'When there is a lack of laughter, something is wrong. It is really true. It breaks people. I sometimes attend meetings and I think: "damn". But when you throw a joke in it... I consciously use humor. I always know how to make a joke in a certain situation. Then the others say: "O, him again". When I am there, you always see others laughing.'

Another practitioner whom we asked about the role of humor in his work, after observing him making lots of jokes during the day, told us that humor works to relax and to break down barriers. According to him, humor disarms.[13] Finally, connecting involves showing genuine interest, listening to what people are up to and responding to them. As a civil servant explained:

> 'At the beginning you have lists and through Socratic questioning you try to find out what is of importance to people. And I think, that image is also confirmed through the Socratic questioning. But not by forcing, like you have to do that. […] By putting myself in the shoes of the person who is taking initiatives, by looking at the ways I could help you through my function. The second is to show interest often: "How are you? Is it working out?" I also go to a lot of performances and events. I do that in my free time. But I just find it interesting. […] I notice that this is highly appreciated. That you visit, that you are visible. I think you can invite people and seduce them because you respond quickly yourself. I often get reactions from people who say: "I'm going to modify my image of the civil servant, because I get an answer." That happens often, that people send an idea or a question to the government and just do not hear anything back. Sometimes they do not know to which department, budget or even alderman it belongs. Then they start to discuss and forget about the fact that a question came in from the outside. And even if you do not know the answer right away, it is good to let that know and periodically give an update on the progress.'

Another practitioner told us that listening is very active, not a passive thing at all. Listening, for him, is a matter of trying to find out if you really understand the person you are working with. This, of course, has nothing to do with the disengaged, impartial State. It has all the more to do with empathic entrepreneurialism. In sum, connecting and transforming applies to people, projects and contexts, and it is done through, for instance, 'translation' knowledges, storytelling, the creation of atmosphere of trust, the use of humor, listening and responding.

Cowboys and buddies

Some of our entrepreneurs are also called 'cowboys' or typify themselves in this way. Cowboys seems to stand for those adventurous types who go where others have not dared to go, who are not afraid of running into trouble. A senior advisor talked about cowboys in the following way:

> 'So, these are the boys with the leather jackets, the cowboys. I try to protect them at the very last moment, because these are the persons that we need to keep society going. If you don't watch out; they are the first victim of cutbacks. I call them cowboys. [...] To put it simple, persons which you have to give an entirely free hand. [...] Don't bother them with meetings and all sorts of structures, but give them something to fiddle with. Because these are the people, that sometimes have more effect than the regular colleagues. Of course, often they have things that they cannot do. One is dyslexic, the other one cannot do that, they cannot write a policy document, but they can mean a lot to us. That is the strength of these guys. Cees, for instance, he enters everywhere. Even when there is shit on the walls, where the bathrooms are dirty, you know what misery. He does it on Saturday evening, but also on Monday morning before 7 pm. Not nine to five. You need that kind of guys. They need some protection. They get more space than others to act; muddling a bit. The only thing is that not everyone accept this.'

Cowboys are looking for the worst cases. They go out there on the front line. One of our practitioners had a sign on his door: 'Know the rules so you can properly break them.' This is an attitude that we have seen in various of our practitioners. It is not that they do not care about the rules, procedures and hierarchy, it is just that they are more about what they want to attain. Take for instance a civil servant who wanted a group of young people to meet the mayor. Because the mayor was dealing with an incident that day, our civil servant was told not to come. He told us that…

> '…At a certain moment we were there together with [an alderman] and Edgar Davids [a famous football player], the Assistant Secretary and a group of youg people at the ROC [regional education center]. We had arranged to drop by [the mayor's place]. What happens? There was panic that day over a important project and the meeting was in the house of the mayor. I was told that we were no longer welcome. So I sms I am on my way. I get a sms back saying "don't come", so I sms back "just you wait and see." So we ride along the canal and go to the house of the mayor. I ring and the fat guy opens the door. I tell him, here we are, I talked to the Assistant Secretary. "O, how nice of you," he said, and we could come in. I did not know anything of course. I close the door and say: "Are you guys coming down or do we have to go up?" I hear some noise and then the mayor comes down the stairs and says: "This is not possible, you again!" So I thought: "This is going to be great." To sum up what happened next: they found it terrific. I talked for half an hour, to pitures […] Everybody is on the picture: Edgar Davids, the mayor, the Assistant Secretary. They were all waving outside and they all found it totally super.'

But even the cowboys and other rule-breakers cannot work alone. Many of the empathic entrepreneurs we met are good in what they do outside the local bureaucracy, but lack resources on the inside. They compensate this through their involvement and working relations with somebody on the other side of the boundary. A buddy. There were also several empathic entrepreneurs working in the local bureaucracy who had buddies taking care of procedures for them in order to keep their hands free for their more entrepreneurial, person-focused style of working (see the quote above). These buddies were knowledgeable of the institutional rules and procedures in a way that our practitioners were not. This finding was confirmed when we studied a practitioner who did not have a buddy 'on the inside'. Even if this person survived up until this moment, (s)he was clearly frustrated by the limits of what (s)he could get done in the neighborhood. Some people have various buddies. For instance someone inside the local bureaucracy and a partner in crime on in the field. One civil servant working with active citizens and members of civil society was a buddy for various of them, but also had his buddy in the local bureaucracy who took care of the procedures and organizational work that was a part of the dealings the local bureaucracy had with his 'clients' but that he did not specialize in. We have to notice, nevertheless, that even if some of our empathic entrepreneurs seemed to be working autonomously and at times even seemed loners, most were also team players when it comes to achieving social goals.

The extra mile and personal histories

Our practitioners are engaged in their work. They are committed. They do not nine to five. They go the extra mile. Perhaps the best example of going the extra mile is the journalist, who after the murder of Theo van Gogh (November 2004) decided that he had to give up on journalism and to start working in the disadvantaged neighborhoods. What he did as a journalist - looking for the strengths and vitality of people in the margins - he kept on doing in the neighborhoods. Only now, the reflective stance gave way to a more active approach. But there are many ways in which practitioners might go beyond what is demanded of them in their professional roles. Listen, for instance, to this police man:

> 'So I don't do alternating shifts any more. I am totally busy with the youth. Only once every two weeks I do a shift, on my own request, in the night in the city center. "In the horecadienst" [shift that focuses on nightlife in bars etc.] we call this over here. That is additional staff patrolling on foot in the bar district.
> That I do. Already for about fifteen years. Every other week I work on Saturday all through the night. The goal is to meet the young people [juvenile delinquents] with whom I work also outside of the interrogation room or the police office. I like to see these guys on the street, to meet them and to talk with them in a different way. And that they see me, that they see me in a different way, with their friends.'

A final point we that we found interesting was the importance of personal histories. The personal histories of the people we followed seemed to matter a lot to

the way they go about their business. This is what we learned from the way various practitioners framed their personal histories at the beginning of the interviews and their motivations at the end. We might go as far as Dubois (2009: 233), stating that personal histories at times seemed to matter more than professional practices. Take the example of the woman who was running the organization for women. Her own integration in Dutch society make her a credible conversation partner for women in need. She had really 'been there'. She typified the position of many women in her neighborhood as follows:

> 'It is difficult, because you have to fight against your husband, against your family in law, against the government, against everything you have to fight here.'

In her case, like in that of many others we followed, empathy came naturally. At the same time she is also very aware of the way one might get out of trouble. She knew from professional *and* personal experience what might work.[14] She stated that every case is different, but she had a excellent feel for the kind of cultural tensions (young) migrant women have to deal with, build up through her own lived experience. It is this experience, joined with empathy and the wish to do something about the problems people in disadvantaged neighborhoods that keeps her, and many others whom we met, going on.

5. Concluding thoughts

In this last section we want to put our findings into perspective. Let us first rephrase the kind of work that empathic entrepreneurs do in urban environments, and disadvantaged neighborhoods in particular. The work of empathic entrepreneur is political work. It is directed towards goals that seem to be beyond the reach of normal politics. It entails efforts to redistribute resources and efforts to empower. It is fueled by an engagement, an empathy that is political through and through. These practitioners are motivated by the view of a better society, even if they are often pragmatic in their view of how we could get there. The work of empathic entrepreneur is also social work. These are not people who get things done on their own, even if they are often a, if not *the*, central actor in a project, department or organization. In their study of everyday fixers, Hendriks and Tops (2005) stated that in order to be successful these actors need to be backed by local administrators. Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks (2009) elaborate on this, stating that political support is necessary, although politicians should leave everyday makers enough room to maneuver. The buddy system we ran into has a similar logic. Exemplary practitioners like our emphatic entrepreneurs are good the social part of the getting things going in neighborhoods. They make connections with the contexts in which they do not spend most of their time and embody the various ways of knowing disadvantaged neighborhoods. But they might need others to complement them in the more technical, administrative and organizational aspects of their work.

The preceding does not mean that our practitioners are always able to make a difference. We met, for instance, a practitioner who had been going through a rough

time. Professionally, he did not survive the organizational fights he got involved with. Do we therefore drop him of our list? No, even if he had rough period behind him, everything about him signaled his quality of work. He told us the following:

> 'I have helped so many people out of misery and advised so many people to do certain things. In fusions, in conflicts over work. I have worked out and arranged so many things. And then, I became a victim myself. I was really in a dark place for some time. I never noticed and never expected that I could be affected this way and could get depressed because of such a process. I just was a victim.'

This again underlines the idea that exemplary practitioners like the ones we focus on are not stand-alone, ever-successful persons. The lesson is that the success of empathic entrepreneurs might turn out to be fragile if the context surrounding them or the environment at large no longer values what they offer. This might happen when the urban environment, the mayor players like the local bureaucracy in particular, turns its back on innovative practices of empathic entrepreneurs. This means that if we believe in the special contribution of empathic entrepreneurs in disadvantaged neighborhoods, we should start thinking about the ways in which we might prevent the environment from turning against them and the ways the environment might enable them to make an exemplary contribution.

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Endnotes

[1] Here, we do not go into the question to what extent individual actors can make a difference. In realist terms one might claim that *actors* important *factors*. In constructivist terms, one might take the actors as one's perspective or level of analysis. In political science, or at least in political life, actors seem to matter more as well. Take the Dutch example of the late Pim Fortuyn or the US example of president Obama. They seem to have been able to change ideas about what is normal in politics, even if 'the system' is more resilient than they would have hoped. They could probably only have made a difference because they were different.

[2] This is not to be confused with best practice, which is mostly treated as a practice stripped of the actors that carry it. Leadbeater and Goss (1998: 22) say something wise about this: 'Good practice can

never be bottled and applied somewhere else like an ointment. There are no one-size-fits-all, magic solutions to complex social problems. The public sector is highly heterogeneous: entrepreneurial solutions will vary for different organizations, with different histories, cultures, users and political leadership.'

[3] These are a variation of the everyday maker Bang and Sorensen (1999) talked about.

[4] Engbersen et al. looked at social leaders in Dutch disadvantaged neighborhoods. They stated that it was especially the ability to make a difference on the basis of personal qualities and engagement, that is special (Engbersen et al. 2007).

[5] The concept of (everyday) fixer (Hendriks and Tops 2005) and enabler (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008) that are used to talk about a certain type of active citizen would fit as an alternative, but sound a bit too much like straightforward Winston-Wolf-like problem solvers (Van Hulst, De Graaf and Van den Brink 2009).

[6] More recent work on policy entrepreneurs is presented in Huitema and Meijerink (2009) and by Mintrom and Norman (2009).

[7] We also understand that the entrepreneur metaphor might for some of our readers bring with it the idea of profit making. What we think the practitioners we study are after is profit indeed, but of the social kind (Leabeater 1997), not of the economical. Economical viability of one's projects and organization is of course needed as well.

[8] Compare Giltay Veth (2009). He talks about survival of the fittest (project and practitioners) in Dutch disadvantages neighborhoods. Survival of the fitting is an expression of Kenneth Boulding (see Morgan 1986).

[9] The idea behind the use of a scout with similar characteristics as the people we were looking for was that he would have more changes of finding people than people who would follow a formal route (e.g., ask for a list from the local government).

[10] The idea of the importance of empathic practitioners came to us gradually. Both our reading of the literatures on practitioners and on disadvantaged neighborhoods, our previous research experiences, debates in the research group and our recent encounters in the field attributed to it. We came to see that they are exemplary practitioners in the specific environment that is formed by disadvantaged neighborhoods.

[11] The differences in selected amount of people is not related to the quality of practitioners in the cities, but has more to do with the size of the cities. Nevertheless, in the bigger cities (Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) De Ruijter focused on three neighborhoods. He got several names from the contact person in the cities, had some contacts of his own in several cities and used snowballing to find other people. The final list was discussed with the cities and some small changes were made after this.

[12] In this paper there is no space to tease out the differences in environment, contexts or demographics.

[13] On humor in public disputes, see Forester (2009). He explains why humor (and irony) is not (just) about making jokes, but about revealing 'multiple meanings and uncertainties, multiple perspectives and their limits, and parties' needs and opportunities to learn' (Forester 2009: 172).

[14] This lady worked as a volunteer. The volunteers we discussed throughout this paper are labeled practitioners who do work. Seen the experience they have in doing it and the extent to which they have developed their skills, we have no problem calling their work professional.